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## MAGAZINE POETRY IN THE CLASSROOM

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We hear the criticism time and again that the schools are trying to teach children to appreciate Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton to the exclusion of much that is good in modern literature. It would be sufficient to reply that we study these authors because they stand supreme, even in comparison with the best of the moderns; and that students, once they have learned to appreciate the best, will come naturally in after-years to apply what they have learned to the appreciation of the literature of the day. To meet the objection half-way, however, let us season our classical studies with a little condiment of contemporary literature. If this is inferior on the whole, its analysis can be made all the more effective by showing that the excellences it does contain are the result of adherence to principles worked out by the masters of past ages.

One of the most fruitful and interesting forms which this work can take is the criticism of current magazine poetry. As a specific class exercise it can be required that every student in the Junior and Senior English classes hand in one piece of poetry a month together with his own opinion of it.

I have the student copy or paste the poem in his formal notebook, and to facilitate this work I have secured the co-operation of the current literature department, which is glad to allow poems to be clipped from duplicate numbers of the *Literary Digest*, the *Outlook*, or *Current Opinion* when this will not cut into valuable articles on the other side of the page. I encourage the copying of the whole poem, however, as it insures a more careful reading of it.

It is best to start the class on its search of the magazines by outlining some definite principles of selection. There are, of course, many qualities that may make a poem striking, but most of them may be included under the head of literary beauty. The things that a high-school student can be taught most easily to discern are: vivid or beautiful similes and metaphors; unusual or

suggestive words and phrases; mellifluous combinations of vowel and consonant sounds; and effective onomatopoeias. All of these should be made concrete by striking examples. For instance, the line

The horns of elfland, faintly blowing,

or

magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faëry lands forlorn

will do wonders in showing students what suggestive effects can be secured in a few simple words. In speaking of the device of onomatopoeia it is well to show that it is displayed not only in such vividly mimetic examples as

oilily bubbled up the mere,

or, to choose an up-to-date example from Nicholas Vachell Lindsay's remarkable poem, "The Congo,"

A thigh-bone beating on a tin pan gong,

but in many subtle and indirect ways through the remote medium of suggestion.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense,

or

The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves

is not strictly mimetic, but for all that there is an indirect suggestion of the sense in the sound of the words.

Now for the comment. It might be thought that little of vital importance could be expected from immature students unacquainted with the ingenious lingo of the critics. And the first comments, it is true, will usually be vague and general and will fail to pick out specific passages. I quote a few: "I was taken with the thought of this poem." "I liked this poem because it is so cleverly expressed." "I liked these lines because of the thought involved in them. The description in the first stanza is very good." "This poem teaches a fine lesson."

This last criticism is one I have had to meet continually. The average high-school mind seems to think that something with a moral in it is what teacher wants, and a large proportion of poems in the first lot were of this sort. Now, I do not mean to bar out didactic poetry from the category of true verse, but in so many

cases the didactic element crowds out so many of the qualities we expect to find in beautiful poetry that I have issued a strict edict against all poems attempting to teach a lesson.

A judicious reading from the first criticisms to show their vague and general character always results in more intelligent comments the next month. After the first month no credit is given for indefinite comments, and the students are forced to read more carefully to discover poetic qualities they were too lazy to seek before. Here are some of the criticisms that are on the way, at least, toward becoming intelligent:

"The little bits of description are particularly good, as, 'The path of grassy slate beneath old maples,' and 'pine woods hanging on the northern turnpike.' These are odd but suit the scene perfectly."

"There are many beautiful phrases in this poem ['Five Ways to Fairy-land']. They are so suggestive of the scenes they describe. 'The dew-drenched, bird-haunted wood' is especially good. A good figure is used in the description of the noon sky as 'a blazing sapphire.' The last two lines of that stanza make us feel the quiet heat of the noonday. Then, in the third stanza, 'softly whispering' and 'faint, sweet odors' are very suggestive."

"I think this is one of the sweetest sad poems I ever came across. The descriptions are very good, especially the lines:

Shimmering tresses uncontrolled  
That clasp her neck with tendrils of gold."

Finally, let me quote samples of the nice discrimination and the enthusiastic appreciation that are developed in some students:

"I wish this were a song so that I could sing it. But it is so filled with music that it sings anyway. You can't stop it; it sings along, sunny and happy, alliterative, colorful, rhythmical. . . ."

"This little poem is filled with descriptive words. It makes you see the ship coming into the harbor. You can fairly hear the roar of the sea and see the gleam of the harbor light in the night. It makes you feel as if you yourself had dreamed the dream through long years, in old forgotten gardens, in the dusky twilight. I like it so!"

Just a few comments like the last two make the whole experiment worth while. I do not deny a certain percentage of failures. It is too much of a round-peg-and-square-hole process to succeed in all cases. Some people are poetry-blind, and no magic touch will give them sight; but so are some people color-blind and deaf. My contention is that poetic taste is latent in most natures and requires only a little exercise to develop it, and that magazine poetry is excellent material to work with because it is living and interesting.